

RACE, RACISM AND THE LAW
Speaking Truth to Power!!

Defining "White Privilege"

white privilege, *a social relation*

1.
 - a. A right, advantage, or immunity granted to or enjoyed by white persons beyond the common advantage of all others; an exemption in many particular cases from certain burdens or liabilities.
 - b. A special advantage or benefit of white persons; with reference to divine dispensations, natural advantages, gifts of fortune, genetic endowments, social relations, etc.

2. A privileged position; the possession of an advantage white persons enjoy over non-white persons.

3.
 - a. The special right or immunity attaching to white persons as a social relation; prerogative.
 - b. *display of white privilege*, a social expression of a white person or persons demanding to be treated as a member or members of the socially privileged class.

4.
 - a. To invest white persons with a privilege or privileges; to grant to white persons a particular right or immunity; to benefit or favor specially white persons; to invest white persons with special honorable distinctions.
 - b. To avail oneself of a privilege owing to one as a white person.

5. To authorize or license of white person or persons what is forbidden or wrong for non-whites; to justify, excuse.

6. To give to white persons special freedom or immunity *from* some liability or burden to which non-white persons are subject; to exempt.

I started WhitePrivilege.com in order to make the structures of white privilege—its causes and effects—less socially invisible, primarily by pointing out instances in U.S. society where it is or seems to be at work. I needed, therefore, a good working definition of the social phenomenon I was looking for. I hit upon the long, detailed definition—which has been used in antiracism education in many educational contexts, including a wide-range of colleges and universities and even PBS—one day, rather suddenly, while talking to a friend of mine, the philosopher Bijan Parsia, who’s spent a good deal of time working on the philosophical theory of oppression. “White privilege is after all,” Bijan said, “a form of social privilege per se.”

If that’s true, one good way to define racialized social privilege is by reference to social privilege generally. In other words, you can figure out what white privilege is in part by figuring out what any social privilege is. So I walked over to my copy of the Oxford English Dictionary, looked up the word “privilege”, and after reading it through a few times, I realized that if I rewrote the definition of privilege to refer to white people, rather than people in general, I would have the basis of a working definition. And so that’s what I did, with a few modifications and changes as seemed appropriate.

In that sense, the definition is like a working hypothesis, subject to change and adjustment as we accumulate and study more and more facts. I have from time to time tried to make the definition less verbally complex (because I initially didn’t realize that the OED’s language is a bit stilted for everyday use) but its main conceptual claims have remained stable.

Why is it important to define “white privilege” so carefully? Because, in part, many people want to deny that it exists at all, especially in response to other people’s assertions that it is at work in some particular situation, that it exists unjustly and so should be dismantled. This pattern of assertion and denial is itself racialized: for the most part, people of color say white people enjoy white privilege, while white people for the most part deny not only that they have it,

but that such a thing even exists. I have been assured countless times by white people that there is no such thing as white privilege and that the very idea is nonsensical.

(For example, among the objections to the *idea* of white privilege, there is one which deserves some consideration here. Given the fact of a systematically unjust society, such as is the case in the U.S., the differential possession of basic human and political rights becomes a privilege. Yes, every person by virtue of being a person has the right to enjoy and possess certain rights. But, in fact, over the long course of U.S. history only white people have enjoyed and possessed the rights which they loudly proclaimed were fundamentally *human* rights. I think it is fitting and accurate, in such an unjust situation, to call the racially differential possession and enjoyment of human rights a privilege arising out of particular social relations.)

In studying historical examples and theories of oppression, it becomes clear that social (in)visibility is an important strategy. Early feminists make this point over and over. If men and women equally believe, for example, that women are *by their very nature* subordinate to men, then gender oppression seems natural, inevitable, timeless. If you can design structures of oppression which are invisible, which seem *natural*, they will be more effective than structures which are visible. If you can convince everyone, but especially members of the oppressed group itself, that the way things are is natural or inevitable or unavoidable, people will be less likely to challenge the way things are.

If that idea is correct, then we should expect the very idea of racialized social privilege—that is, social privilege which attaches to a group or groups which are identified racially (whether one understands ‘races’ culturally or scientifically)—to be invisible socially. We should expect that members of the dominant group, the one which has the privilege, to deny that it exists or that it *could* exist. Which is precisely what we white folks do (for the most part) when faced with claims by people of color that we enjoy social privilege by virtue of the social fact that we are taken to be white.

To sum up, (1) white privilege should be defined carefully because it is contested; (2) that contestation is itself racialized, (3) which is what we should

expect, since (4) socially invisible structures of oppression are more effective and enduring than socially visible ones.

We define it in order to make it a problem for white people, to show that it is an unjust, historical creation. *Whatever has been made by human hands can be unmade by others.*